



U.S. Fish and Wildlife Service

Aransas National Wildlife Refuge

Whooping Crane Update – March 15, 2012

Precipitation/Salinity:

As of March 14, the monthly precipitation totals for Aransas National Wildlife Refuge are .85 inches and salinity levels in San Antonio Bay are recorded as 19.7 parts per thousand. With salinity levels below 20 parts per thousand, conditions in the marsh are normalizing and food production for the birds improving. Even so, the refuge is still not to pre-drought conditions and biologists remain concerned.

Food Sources:

Since the last update, the refuge conducted an additional prescribed burn, raising the winter's total to 12,310 acres of habitat. The refuge's fire program hopes to conduct a final burn in the next few weeks on Matagorda Island but the changing weather makes it uncertain. Despite one burn remaining, all of the burns planned in areas whooping cranes would likely use have been completed and were successful.

Reports:

The report from the first carcass (recovered Dec. 7, 2011) was issued from the National Wildlife Health Center (NWHC) and it indicates the bird had a systemic blood infection. Elsewhere, this type of systemic infection has been known to cause death. The refuge is still waiting on the final report from the second carcass (recovered January 18, 2012). A third carcass of a radio-collared bird was recovered (Feb. 29, 2012) and sent to the NWHC in Madison, WI last week for necropsy.

The refuge will issue a final 'State of the Cranes' report summarizing the significant events that occurred during the 2011-12 whooping crane season.

Surveys:

High winds and low cloud cover impeded the flights scheduled during late February, allowing for only two of the three scheduled flights. Those flights were conducted on February 25 and 26, 2012. Preliminary data analyses indicated the population of cranes within the surveyed area was 196. Although lower than the previous estimate, the difference is not statistically significant and most likely the result of limited flying time. Also, this number does not reflect whooping cranes outside the survey area, including those that have dispersed. Radio-marked birds and sightings of cranes from the flyway indicate the birds have begun their northern migration back to Wood Buffalo National Park in the Northwest Territories of Canada where they nest exclusively. Depending on the weather, biologists hope to conduct another flight before the end of the month.

Supplemental Feeding:

The refuge continues to get questions regarding supplemental feeding. At this time, the refuge is concerned about the negative impacts of supplemental feeding. Previous efforts to supplemental feed were not considered successful as only a small portion of the birds actually fed on the shelled corn. Whooping cranes are territorial and do not naturally gather together to feed. Encouraging them to do so changes their natural behavior; it also creates greater opportunities to transmit diseases, parasites, and makes them more vulnerable to predators. Furthermore, when left out in warm and moist environments, like coastal marsh areas, corn can grow Aspergillus molds. Aflatoxins, which are produced by the molds, can be lethal to whooping cranes and other wildlife. Where whooping cranes may be present, landowners should be aware of the risks that aflatoxins pose. If corn is being used for feeding other wildlife in areas where whooping cranes may be present, we highly recommend purchasing aflatoxin-free corn.

Helpful Information:

Whooping Crane Draft Revised International Recovery Plan (2006):

<http://www.fws.gov/southwest/refuges/texas/aransas/pdf/WHCR%20RP%20Final%207-21-2006.pdf>

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